

Postpositivism and the Dilemmas of Social Planning

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Every once in awhile I recall something that happened while I was a graduate student trying to complete a doctoral dissertation. My project called for interviews with a number of management and union leaders in New York City. Everyone was, of course, busy and had little time or inclination to sit still for a two-hour interview with an overserious sociology graduate student. One union leader was especially difficult to corral. He had made and broken half a dozen or more appointments with me and had just informed me he was about to break another. I looked at him ruefully and said, "Gee, Mr.____, you sure make it tough for a fellow." Whereupon Mr.____ took a few long puffs on his cigar and said thoughtfully, "Somebody maybe told you it would be easy?"

Well, it has not been easy either for me or for other members of my profession. And it will not become less difficult by the time the year 2000 rolls by.

Ineffective Framework

The undeniable truth seems to be that contemporary social science, as shaped by the now hoary tradition of positivism (the wish to develop a viable "social physics"), has been dismally ineffective in uncovering truly useful "truths" about the social world. It has been equally unsuccessful in convincing social policymakers to do things that will improve living conditions for most people in this world. All this would have been frustrating enough to Auguste Comte, but, in the words of Gertrude Lenzer, his name seems to have become "virtually dissociated from the history of modern positivism and the most recent debates about it, although he was one of its most illustrious proponents and first elaborators."

Those contemporary sociologists influenced more directly by twentieth century logical positivism (or logical empiricism or neopositivism, depending upon your semantic preferences) are presumably even more chagrined by this conspicuous lack of success. A strict adherence to the rules of the game, as set down by George A. Lundberg many years ago, would have effectively barred social scientists from "applying" their knowledge when so little of it exists as judged by

strict positivist criteria. Lundberg's answer to the question "What shall we do while we wait for the social sciences to develop?" was crystal clear—and fundamentally unsatisfactory for anyone itching to "do something" about problems like poverty, or alienation. His answer, "We shall doubtless continue to suffer," does not seem to be very helpful.

Among other contemporary sociologists, those critical of this tradition, it has been the fashion for some time now to chide their positivist colleagues with contributing to what Abraham Kaplan has called the "myth of methodology"—that it does not much matter what gets done so long as it is done right. The major critical thrust here has been directed at the assumption of a value-free discipline that seemed to rest at the core of all varieties of positivist thought.

Emerging Orientation

But there is abundant evidence to document the thesis that a different intellectual orientation is emerging in the wake of early twentieth century neopositivism: an intellectual orientation which we can call postpositivism. It is an orientation which unquestionably will still be around in one form or another—for better or worse—in the year 2000. It is rapidly making obsolete the shibboleths of traditional positivism on the one hand and traditional left-wing or even simple phenomenological criticisms of positivism on the other.

Postpositivism has arisen from the "realm" in systems theory that Ludwig von Bertalanffy has called "systems technology." Bertalanffy, the "father of general systems theory," has tried to explain his offspring as an intellectual reorientation made necessary in physics, biology, the social sciences, and philosophy because of the change from *power* engineering (which released large amounts of energy in such gadgets as steam and electric machines) to *control* engineering (which in the form of computers and automation uses lower power devices to direct various processes). These "self-controlling" machines range from simple thermostats to the self-steering missiles of World War II and contemporary ICBMs. One important implication of all this, according to Bertalanffy, is that one could once have been a specialist in steam engines, automobiles, or radio receivers, but no one

can be a specialist in ballistic missiles or space vehicles. To build these new machines, components have to be assembled from a variety of disciplines, and a "systems" approach becomes necessary.

Bertalanffy distinguishes three separate "realms" in the domain of systems: (1) *general systems theory* addressed to the scientific exploration of wholes and "wholeness"; (2) *systems technology* dealing with the problems arising from modern technology and society, including such things as computer hardware and "software," automation, and self-regulating machinery ("software," of course, provides instructions to the computer or automatic machinery, but it may well involve new theoretical developments and even new disciplines); and (3) *systems philosophy*—the changes in thought and world-view made necessary by the introduction of "system" as a new scientific orientation replacing the mechanistic, one-way, causal paradigm of classical science.

Bertalanffy is a truly seminal thinker. Unfortunately, however, there is little evidence that the changes in thought and world-view he envisioned have permeated the thinking of systems technologists. On the contrary, in contemporary adaptations of the systems orientation, systems theory becomes the focal point for some mind-shattering contradictions. It characteristically degenerates into an exhaustive analysis of rigidly bounded established situations. Thus ultimately it becomes a search for an exhaustive inventory of presumably ultimate truths on the one hand, or an insistence upon specifying what *shall* become such truths on the other.

Bertalanffy seems to take for granted the technological developments that presumably impose the necessity for a systems approach. Why all the fragmentation he describes occurs in the first place is an interesting question with which I cannot deal here. Thus one might well ask whether it is all a more or less inevitable development in the game of twentieth century capitalism rather than simply a "natural" result of technological evolution. In any event, the results of the fragmentation are clear; greater degrees of concentration and control are provided not only to industrial and political management, but within the very fabric of intellectuality itself. How scientific disciplines are defined, how acceptable their methodology turns out to be, and what means will be used to certify expertise—all these are fundamentally dependent upon what the "real world" is like, and contemporary reality is becoming increasingly more "technological" in character.

Postpositivist Impulse

Here are a few quotations which may suggest some of the dimensions as well as the ethos of postpositivism. From Richard W. Pew in a handbook on systems engineering:

An important unifying concept for design of man machine systems lies in the view of man as a channel, limited-transmission capacity, information-processing system. This view regards man as an information channel in the cybernetic sense rather than as an energy converter or power supply. Man is certainly capable of power generation, and the limits of this ability are of

interest, but in modern systems most use is made of man's information-handling and controlling abilities.

From a commentary by the Executive Committee of the influential Club of Rome:

We are convinced that realization of the quantitative restraints of the world environment and of the tragic consequences of an overshoot is essential to the initiation of new forms of thinking that will lead to a fundamental revision of human behavior and, by implication, of the entire fabric of present-day society.

From an article written by C. West Churchman, a distinguished former philosopher who has become one of the leading systems theorists and practitioners in this country:

The prescription which Kant developed was that every individual ought to be treated as an end in himself and never as a means only. One aspect of the systems approach and systems analysis is how to resolve this basic conflict between the individual as an end-in-himself and the total social good. Systems analysts are do-gooders. They are trying to help improve social systems. But in all their studies they make recommendations which lead to treating individuals as means, rather than as ends. Hence in some sense they fail in that aspect of the total value system which deals with the moral dimension.

Initially, systems technology and the doctrines of post-positivism were offered as necessary intellectual antidotes to existing fragmentation; their advocates, however, have become leaders in the race for increasing fragmentation of methods and goal definitions. Ida Hoos has suggested that, "supposed to overcome the piece-meal fragmentation of other, more specialized approaches, the systems approach has provided a language that talks of the total embrace of social processes and dynamics but delivers methods that reduce wholes to their arbitrary and often least important common denominators. Supposed to solve problems, it has merely served to redefine them in a way amenable to technical treatment."

But this critique is perhaps too narrowly restricted to methodological considerations. One can scarcely charge postpositivists with being nothing more or less than stupid. If the systems approach is supposed to overcome the piecemeal orientation or fragmentation characteristic of more traditional positivism and does not do so, one must ask, "Why not?"

As any self-respecting Talmudist will tell you, there are at least two possibilities: (1) postpositivists are indeed less than spectacularly intelligent (which is, of course, a possibility; but then we must raise questions about the intelligence of their critics, and this can embroil us in endless ad hominem disputation); (2) they are highly intelligent in the pursuit of a different set of goals. What might these goals be? If post-positivism focuses attention on the "wrong" questions, to what extent are the "wrong" questions the right ones for some of the population—especially for those who turn out to

be the de facto clients of postpositivist practitioners and theorists?

Postpositivism and the Welfare State

At this point we must examine another contradiction. Social planning in the United States, especially of the large-scale or global variety, has traditionally seemed to be an idea of the political Left—a specter draped in colors ranging from pale parlor pink to flaming “Commie” red. “Reasonable” planning acceptable to the liberal Center or conservative Right must assume more of the character of what Karl Popper has called “piece-meal engineering.” Global national planning in the United States achieved respectability through addressing problems posed by the military establishment; it continues to be intimately related to the concerns of large corporations both in the defense sector and elsewhere—and has been defended vigorously by the political Right. Planning on behalf of what has become known as the “welfare state,” however, has assumed much more of a deliberate piecemeal character (for example, urban planning, work on the social problems of crime, delinquency, and so on)—and has been defended by left liberals, if not by the entire political Left. Political identifications, like bedfellowships, are often strange and ephemeral affairs.

Although postpositivism achieved its initial prominence in connection with military planning, it has, in more recent years, invaded the area of the welfare state. Perhaps the most decisive single event in this connection is to be found in President Lyndon Johnson’s executive order of 1965 proclaiming that the Programming Planning Budget System, which had achieved such marked notoriety—if not success—in connection with defense planning at the Pentagon, would be made mandatory for all federal departments and agencies. Sociologists, of course, have been heavily engaged in dealing with problems of the welfare state.

Popular conceptions of the welfare state envision it as a state providing for all the needs of its citizens. Implicit in these conceptions is the symbolic presence of an oil can carried by statesmen whose efforts are guided by the loftier visions of piecemeal social planners. Squeaky parts are lubricated—more or less adequately—and the oil can moves on. Since there are many more squeaks than can possibly be dealt with by available cans, the entire enterprise is dismissed as “utopian.”

The word “utopian” here is used as a synonym for “impossible.” The uninitiated may well ask, “Isn’t it strange that sociologists and social planners should work away at a task authoritatively classified as ‘impossible’?” The standard reply: “We don’t really try to accomplish the impossible—we do what we can. It is our job to help decide upon priorities. We do cost-benefit analyses in areas ranging from poverty to health to cities, drugs and problems of war and peace. We use social indicators to chart our progress; we don’t expect too much and we encourage policymakers and others to lower their sights. For example, we raise questions. What is an *acceptable* rate of unemployment? What are *acceptable* levels of water or air pollution? If the death rate

due to aircraft accidents is smaller than the death rate due to automobile accidents, is that good?”

Uncertain Ethos

But the core difficulty with the welfare state is to be found not in its performance record but in its ethos—its distinguishing belief system. These days it is often seen as a more or less typical democratic government in the West in which national power is used to modify the more deleterious consequences of the “free” economic and political marketplace. Thus it is characterized by a potpourri of “programs” to ameliorate conditions in such diverse fields as health, housing, employment, education, and legal or political rights of individuals.

Such an inventory of piecemeal programs is a far cry from what William Temple, archbishop of York, had in mind when he coined the term “welfare state” in 1941. The archbishop wrote at a time when the memories of World War II and the excesses of Nazi Germany were fresh in his mind and in the minds of his readers. He proposed the concept of the welfare state as a contrast to that of the power state. The prototype of the power state was Hitler’s Germany, and its primary task was to maintain power over its citizens. Temple saw the welfare state as a servant and instrument of the Christian God. Its primary task was to preserve justice and promote human welfare to the extent this could be done by universally applicable laws or by opportunities created by such laws.

For a twentieth century British clergyman, the concept of welfare was perhaps inevitably and inextricably bound up with vaguely defined or even indefinable notions involving matters of the spirit or soul. But the idea of helping others is scarcely the exclusive province of Christianity. Concepts related to the familiar notion of Christian charity were, of course, understood and practiced by ancient Babylonians, Greeks, and Hebrews. In the modern world they continue to be important articles of faith for Buddhists, Hebrews, and many other religious groups throughout the world.

It is clear, however, that the notion of charity is not exclusively a religious concept; it is rooted in some very mundane facts about social existence in the everyday world. These facts have to do with human deprivation and the sense of futility experienced by many persons within any society who either are directly affected by the facts or whose sense of outrage is aroused by them. Economic deprivation is a condition which presumably can be remedied, at least somewhat, by the actions of those who are less deprived. But charity, and concepts related to it, constitute partial remedies at best. Deprivation can occur only when social inequality is postulated as a taken-for-granted feature of society. Charity, however, is addressed not to the problem of inequality but to that of deprivation. Or is it?

If you are hungry and I give you enough money to buy one meal, I have not really dealt even with your deprivation (presumably you do not know where your next meal will be coming from—or when it will arrive), but I have certainly established the fact that I am the giver and you are the

receiver of charity. We clearly are not equal, and the net result of our transaction has been to solidify this inequality. Nevertheless, it is not entirely fair to think of my charitable gestures simply as selfishness. The Latin word for charity, *caritas*, which was adopted by the early Christians, refers to a love extending beyond one's family; it symbolizes love for mankind as a whole. For Jews charity has always retained something of the quality of an obligation or duty.

But in secular states—ruled directly neither by a Christian, Hebrew, nor any other deity—characteristically there is no institution for expressing concern on behalf of all mankind. On the contrary, governments have usually become concerned about deprivation, even of their own citizens, only under unusual circumstances (such as threats of rebellion). To assert that concern for the deprivation of others is a *duty* or, conversely, that people suffering from deprivation have a *right* to receive aid from others, is to propose a remarkable vision of the state itself.

Traditional Interventions

Thus the modern version of the welfare state contrasts sharply with the model of a state as envisioned by traditional adherents of *laissez faire*, and in this sense the conception of national government as a welfare state did not, of course, originate with Archbishop Temple. Its origins have been traced at least as far back as the later Middle Ages. This is not the place for an extended historical examination of the birth, childhood, adolescence, old age, death, and rebirths of various welfare states. It is, however, important to note that the concern for what has been broadly referred to as the “welfare” of ordinary people has become firmly established as an essential feature of the modern state.

It is perhaps no less important to note that the reasons for this concern go far beyond a simple interest in helping other human beings in need. They involve fundamental issues of social policy and even the very continued existence of the state in a given form. The state, of course, can scarcely be viewed as a fixed entity with permanent psychological, moral, or political boundaries and easily ascertainable interests. All of these change at least in some detail in various places and at various times. Yet there seems to be a remarkable stability in at least the range of interventions identifiable with welfare states.

Nevertheless, indifferent success or worse seems to have become an enduring feature of these states. As Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven have expressed it, “Welfare capitalism has turned out to mean new areas of profit underwritten by the public sector and enlarged state responsibility for disciplining the labor force. For the victims, welfare capitalism was capitalism, not welfare.”

Values versus Problem Solving

Postpositivism is not at all reluctant to adopt value positions, but these values embrace fundamental contradictions which ultimately become reflected in enormous technical difficulties for serious social scientists. There is a schizo-

phrenic-like haze beclouding the perceptions of social scientists as well as those of the general public.

Evidence of this schizophrenia is apparent in conflicting attitudes toward current social issues. On the one hand, humanistic concern with those who are unfortunate is widespread; on the other hand, there is abundant evidence of a pervasive, “dog-eat-dog” philosophy permeating the thinking not only of political and economic leaders but of ordinary citizens as well. Is medical care too expensive? Tough. Find the money somewhere or drop dead. The people who deserve to live are those who can afford to pay the price. If you cannot afford the price for a balanced diet for your children, do not come to us with your problems. The food will go to those who can afford to pay. Your money or your life or your health.

It is simply light years beyond the scope of the jobs of systems analysts or their clients to think about such questions as the relationship of a “free enterprise” philosophy to simple mundane questions like the incidence of crime. For many ordinary persons, political leaders, and systems analysts, law enforcement is seen as the number one domestic social problem. But if crime is viewed as a form of highly individualized private enterprise, then increases in it are quite consistent with an ethos or philosophy that is “individualistic” or “conservative” as opposed to what in recent years we have become accustomed to thinking of as “liberal” or even “radical.” If my individual initiative instincts tell me that the most effective method for making a “fast buck” is to peddle heroin or mug an old lady or burglarize a home, who can really blame me for trying? It is illegal? I might get caught? These are simply some of my entrepreneurial risks. Business is always something of a gamble. Those fellows in Washington did all right for themselves for many years before they got caught—and they did not do so badly after they got caught what with television appearances, books, and the like. You win a few and lose a few. At least I will not be sponging off the government.

In short, completely effective measures to eliminate crime (as conventionally defined) are ultimately inconsistent with an ethos of extreme individualism. Suppression of crime characteristically involves repressive measures of various kinds. It is at this point that individualism on the Left finds itself in opposition to government anticrime policies, albeit for quite different reasons than does individualism on the Right.

Thus difficulties in developing adequate criteria for law enforcement can be traced, at least on one level, to the piecemeal approach which inevitably involves an abstracted view of the world. This abstracted view of the world is taken from a specialized perspective that implicitly ignores larger concerns of the welfare state for the specialized concerns of power brokers. Systems analysts identify with the system and the objectives defined by the perspective of professional law enforcement officials. It is not within the purview of these officials to concern themselves with nonpolice solutions to the problem of crime or to think about the development of equipment or procedures designed to do such things as protect the rights of suspects.

Measures for Control

The contradictions inherent in piecemeal social engineering give rise to strong pressures to resolve them by utilizing the socially acceptable control measures found in private industry. Dramatic examples of the contemporary status of cities in the United States are found from time to time when they are threatened with "bankruptcy." Cities borrow money very much as private corporations do. Investors buy municipal bonds for very much the same sorts of reasons they buy bonds issued by private corporations. It is, accordingly, easy to understand the pressures brought from time to time to induce city governments to become more like private corporations in virtually all significant respects. No one seemed to be very shocked when, a few years ago, a study of forty-six of the country's largest cities led to the recommendation that U.S. cities should provide for their taxpayers and investors financial statements similar to those provided by private corporations whose stocks and bonds are sold publicly. The report, issued by a nationally prominent firm of certified public accountants and a distinguished university, recommended that if states do not require uniform accounting rules for local governments, then such standards should be established by the federal government.

The perspective from which recommendations like these stem is, of course, a financial one designed to protect investors on the one hand and cities themselves on the other. If city governments do not adhere to the same standards of accounting demanded of business corporations, then presumably the cities will find themselves at a competitive disadvantage when they try to borrow money from the public. Financial statements, however, are scarcely sufficient for the purpose of assessing financial soundness. If an investor is to lend money to someone, he is understandably interested in the kind of business the borrower conducts and its potential for yielding continuing profits. But the strategy of planning to maximize financial stability or profitability is quite different from that addressed to the "welfare" of residents.

Postpositivism, then, does not, like its positivist forbears, pretend to be value free. On the contrary, systems technologists, in using their postpositivist methodologies, insist upon clearly stated goals, objectives, and implicit or explicit value orientations. It is in the formulation and manipulation of these values that economic and political control can be maintained by clients of postpositivist methodologists. To state all this in the vocabulary of evaluation researchers, we must simply conclude that postpositivism has been *unsuccessful* in dealing with the intellectual as well as the practical social problem issues posed by the challenge of humanistic social planning. Existing societal values are left untouched while changes are sought in subsystem operations. The welfare state, to the extent that it relies upon postpositivism for its theoretical and methodological framework, is simply not equipped intellectually to deal with the problems of welfare.

As we approach the end of the 1970s, it is perhaps at long last becoming clear to many in the American social science

community that intellectuality has been too long separated from what it has always regarded as mundane considerations of social action. Efforts to "solve" social problems from intellectual sanctuaries are increasingly being revealed as the road to intellectual shoddiness. Social scientists have been trying, for many years now, to drape the purple robes of physical science respectability about their undernourished shoulders. The rationalization accompanying this process has led to a reduced utilization of the data of relevant raw reality at precisely the same time that enormous increases in data processing capability are being widely heralded.

Intellectual Renovation

What implications does this hold for the year 2000? I really do not know. Or rather, it all depends. It is quite possible that most American social scientists will continue to do the expedient thing and continue the rituals of postpositivism because it is the convenient, fashionable, and profitable way to proceed. The sheer intellectual futility of this process will ultimately disturb many of them even if moral and humanistic considerations continue to leave them untouched. In any event, it seems that American social science needs drastic intellectual refurbishing if it is to survive in the years immediately ahead. The sociologist of the year 2000 had better be well versed in the philosophical, historical, and even literary underpinnings of his discipline if he is to be at all "relevant."

This is not a matter of trivial academic specialization. The advent of postpositivism requires direct and open consideration of "system objectives" or values. Technical considerations of postpositivist methodology embrace the value issue, openly and deliberately. How to deal with it poses the central issue for sociologists looking ahead toward the next two decades. Beyond this, and perhaps in intimate conjunction with it, it is possible to detect the outlines of a newer empiricism—one that is not confined to the manipulation of carefully filtered data; one that is not confined to the pursuit of some unattainable Platonic Truth; one calling for action and involvement today as well as searches for "knowledge" of the "future" in a cosmos dominated by an eternally present and eternally relevant "now."

So the most significant time frame is today—as well as the year 2000. And for today perhaps the most pressing social science task is to begin searching dialogues and action initiatives to challenge the no-longer-hidden value imperatives of contemporary "respectable" social science. This can lead (hopefully well before the year 2000) to the shaping of viable alternatives to the intellectual and moral dilemmas now confronting postpositivism. □

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